DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 137 944 EA 009 422

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TITLE Statewide Educational Reform: New Jersey's "Thorough and Efficient" Mandate.
PUB DATE 5 Apr 77
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, N.Y., April 4-8, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Court Litigation; *Educational Accountability; *Educational Finance; Educational Objectives; Elementary Secondary Education; *Finance Reform; Needs Assessment; State Departments of Education; *State Legislation; *State Standards
IDENTIFIERS *New Jersey

ABSTRACT

The New Jersey Constitution requires that all students receive a "thorough and efficient" education. In Robinson v. Cahill, the New Jersey Supreme Court found that the state funding system and program monitoring systems were inadequate and ordered the legislature to correct these deficiencies. As a result, New Jersey has recently implemented a comprehensive financial and program accountability system for all school districts. This paper reviews the monitoring program for school finances, educational programs, minimum standards, and assessment and evaluation of all educational goals. How this new system interacts with federal programs, state compensatory education, program budgeting, and school organization is also discussed. In conclusion, the author offers a preliminary assessment of the new system, based on early results during its first year of operation. (Author/JG)

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STATEWIDE EDUCATIONAL REFORM:

NEW JERSEY'S "THOROUGH AND EFFICIENT" MANDATE

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Presented at the American Educational Research Association's
Annual Meeting, April 5, 1977

EA 009 422

STATEWIDE EDUCATIONAL REFORM:

New Jersey's "Thorough and Efficient" Mandate

I. Introduction

The Constitution of the State of New Jersey states that the legislature must, "provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of free public schools . . ." Legal action was brought on behalf of a student, Kenneth Robinson, claiming that he was not receiving a "thorough and "efficient" education. Arguments similar to those in "Serrano" and "Rodriguez" were presented to the effect that the fiscal support base was inadequate in the urban schools and that the school programs themselves were inadequate.

The New Jersey Supreme Court found that the state funding system and program monitoring systems were inadequate. The Court went on to order the legislature to correct these deficiencies.

After almost three years of drafting and revising proposals, the legislature passed and the Governor signed into law Chapter 212 of the Laws of 1975 which provided for an accountability system for school programs and a revised funding system.

II. Educational Programs

The system adopted by the legislature is a general accountability model which requires that educational goals be developed at both the state and local levels. In developing these goals, wide-spread community involvement is required. Secondly, a needs assessment must be conducted to ascertain the degree to which both schools and districts are achieving their goals. Program development must then follow which is followed in turn by evaluation. All components of this planning process must be shared with the public.

Particular items of emphasis in the law are basic communication and computational skills, breadth of course offerings, students with special needs, physical facilities, and qualified instructional staff.

Each school must report annually on its progress in meeting the "thorough and efficient" (T&E) requirements. At the same time, a comprehensive needs assessment of all state goals must be conducted every five years.

The State of New Jersey has had a long history of local autonomy in the schools. Recognizing this, the legislature developed a system of state monitoring of educational process. All local schools and districts are free to develop their own goals and programs. In a later amendment to the law, the legislature departed from this principle in requiring

minimum standards in the basic communication and computational skills. This amendment establishes statewide standards of performance and requires that students who are below state mastery receive remedial instruction until they have mastered these skills. For all schools where students are below mastery, a Basic Skills Improvement Plan must be filed with the district's annual T&E report due on July 1 of each year.

III. Financial Reform

Prior to the decision in Robinson vs. Cahill, the urban areas were taxing themselves heavily on relatively modest tax bases and were still unable to raise sufficient revenues to operate their school systems properly. By contrast, the suburban and seashore communities were taxing themselves at a low rate and raising sufficient revenues.

The new "thorough and efficient" law raises the state tax support level to about 40 percent statewide on the average. Budget "caps" are placed on all districts which are designed to allow the less affluent districts to "catch-up" with their more affluent neighbors. At the same time, a graduated income tax (2-2.5%) was introduced to raise the monies to support the increased state funding of education. These income tax monies are also used to provide property tax relief.

Special funding above the budget caps is provided for special education, handicapped children, bilingual education, and vocational education. A state compensatory education fund is also provided under these categorical funds as well as a research and development fund.

The state is also implementing a program oriented budget system with the first implementation phase scheduled for Fiscal Year 78.

IV. State Department Organization

These sweeping changes which are summarized above required fundamental changes in the operational system of the State Department of Education. Prior to this legislation, the Department was primarily concerned with federal program administration and the administration of relatively discrete state programs. The "T&E" law required a much stronger monitoring and technical assistance capability.

Each of the twenty-one county offices required augmentation. These offices, which had previously been primarily administrative in nature, had to take on a stronger role in assuring that each district and school met the requirements of the law. In addition, they became the first appeal unit for budget problems as well as controversies and disputes. They now are conducting visitations into each district in order to assure compliance with each component of the law.

It was immediately evident that the State Department must not only monitor the implementation of the law, but also had to provide technical assistance to the schools and districts to assist them in meeting their legal requirements. Though there are many districts in the state who have sufficient staff and resources, a great number of districts required assistance in establishing goals, deriving objectives, and setting standards. Help was also needed in selecting, developing, and/or implementing programs to achieve local goals. For this reason, Educational Improvement Centers were established in the four regions of the state. These centers serve as clearinghouses for educational programs and information. They also conduct workshops and in-service training to assist districts in meeting their needs. The Title IV-C operation is also being decentralized to these Improvement Centers in order to establish closer linkages to the local districts.

V. Progress and Effectiveness Of The New Accountability Law

The implementation of the law began on July 8, 1976. Consequently, we have not yet had a full year of operation. The Department chose to concentrate on three elements for this first year: T&E program plans, basic skills, and program oriented budget.

All schools and districts filed a T&E program plan on December 1, 1976 noting the steps and procedures which they were to follow in establishing goals, conducting needs assessments, developing and implementing programs, and conducting evaluations. Of the 600 districts in New Jersey, 87 percent will complete their goal definitions by July 1, 1977. Of the remaining 13 percent, practically all of the districts had previously established goals.

The Departmental Plan allows for a five-year period for full operation. A number of districts are well into needs assessment, program development and evaluation procedures.

Each district also filed a Basic Skills Improvement Plan on December 1, 1976 which indicated the results of previous needs assessment work utilizing both state and local test instruments.

In January, the first print-outs were returned to local schools and districts which contained the results of the minimum standards program. A 65 percent mastery level on the state reading and mathematics tests was selected as the interim statewide standard. Students who were both below this standard and also in the lowest scoring 20 percent of the state were required to receive remedial assistance this spring. All other students below state standard are required to receive assistance during the coming school year.

All new programs for next year were required to be submitted in program oriented format. All budgets will be in this format within two years.

Experience to date indicates that the budget caps will have to be modified. At the current time, the cap limits are too restrictive for a great number of districts. The caps also tend to "equalize" up to the middle level income districts but do not affect the pre-cap, relatively high spending districts in the more affluent areas.

VI. Plans For Next Year

The T&E process is a gradual phase-in operation. As noted above, a full five-year cycle will be required to meet all requirements of the law.

In terms of the T&E process, most districts will be conducting needs assessments next school year. At the same time, the state will begin work on conducting the comprehensive needs assessment required in the law. Considerable augmentation of the technical assistance capability will be required.

The state compensatory education program will be articulated more closely with other basic skills programs such as Right-to-Read and Title I. The funding formula will also be revised. The program works essentially as a repayment program for local districts. It was found, however, that the districts who often had the fewest resources to mount local programs were also the districts who had the highest needs. This program will be articulated with the minimum standards program in order to base entitlements on

a combination of state testing scores and socio-economic criteria in the future.

Basic Skills program guidelines are also in development to assist districts in developing and implementing programs. These guidelines are designed to articulate all federal, state, and local programs within an individualized content.

Other developmental efforts are being conducted in anchoring basic skills tests, the development of other communication skills measures and programs, and the study of the feasibility of implementing graduation requirements. (NOTE: Several bills addressed to graduation requirements have been introduced in the state legislature).

The T&E process was also designed with feedback mechanisms. The legislature's Joint Committee on the Public Schools has the responsibility of monitoring the implementation of the process and of recommending modifications to the law in order for it to operate as effectively as possible. To date, the major changes that have been recommended are an increase in the ceiling of the budget caps and a change in the basis for determining compensatory education entitlements.

Other legislative monitoring efforts underway include studies of the adequacy of state aid, the impact on taxes, performance in basic skills, the adequacy of state categorical program support, state and local goals and standards, post-

secondary employment and education, school staff evaluation, school system organization, and enforcement procedures.

VII. Summary and Conclusions

The State of New Jersey has embarked on one of the most sweeping accountability efforts in the nation. The program includes both educational process and fiscal accountability. Product accountability is represented in the minimum standards legislation and in the comprehensive needs assessment of all state goals. The process also includes the method of taxation in the state and the distribution of monies.

The system is now in its first year of operation. Though it is too early to draw definitive conclusions, the educational process portion (goal setting, needs assessment, etc.) is progressing satisfactorily. The budget caps appear to be somewhat constrictive and the legislature is addressing this concern at the present time. The minimum standards and basic skills programs are also on timeline and the first test results on these programs will be available in spring, 1978.

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